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ISLAMIC CLERIC PREACHES COMPASSION BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS

The message is not directed at Israel alone, but also at the Palestinians.

BY GREER FAY CASHMAN | JUNE 14, 2018 18:34

Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf shakes hands with President Reuven Rivlin, June 14, 2018.. (photo credit: Mark Neiman/GPO)

Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf, an Islamic cleric from Indonesia who serves as secretary-general of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) supreme council – the world's largest Sunni Muslim organization

that claims some 60 million members and that teaches that Islam's primary principle is one of universal love and compassion – has come to Israel with a one-word message: "rahma" – the Arabic word for "compassion."

The message is not directed at Israel alone, but also at the Palestinians. Without rahma, he said at a meeting organized by the Israel Council on Foreign Relations at the North African Jewish Heritage Center in Jerusalem, there can be no peace.

Staquf, usually known as Yahya, came to Israel at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee to address its Global Forum, and also spoke at the Truman Center at the Hebrew University and to other groups.

The cleric also met with President Reuven Rivlin, whose opinion he shares that there can be no progress towards peace without confidence-building measures.

In his address to the ICFR, Yahya said that he knew before coming to Israel that his visit would spark a lot of controversy back home among his own people, because to go to the Jewish state to address a Jewish organization was widely perceived as some form of betrayal of the Palestinians.

Resisting all attempts at deterrence, Yahya said that it was obvious that as a Muslim leader that he loved the Palestinians and stood by them. "What can you expect from a Muslim like me?" he had told his detractors.

Yet, while he loves the Palestinian people, he refuses to stand by retaliation and conflict, he said.

"I stand for the betterment of a humane Indonesia," he said.

While there has been a lot of criticism back home, a survey taken there during his visit, following media reports of his activities, indicates that 89% of the population approves of what he has done.

He did not come as a representative of Indonesia, he clarified. He came as a cleric because "I am concerned about Palestine and the Palestinian people."

He also interpreted the AJC's invitation as an indication of a willingness to listen by people who still have hope for peace and a solution to the conflict. "This is what encouraged me to come," he said.

His deepest concern, he said, was that all the efforts for peace and all the negotiations have led nowhere. "The efforts are stuck and all hopes for peace are tired," he said.

Alluding to prayers for peace and ecumenical activities aimed at promoting peace, Yahya said that "God will not change the condition of people unless they change what is in their heart."

Both sides have done things to hurt each other, he said, so whatever it is that motivates them to keep doing this is deeper than land or a demand for what each side perceives as justice.

Each side has its own narrative and its own list of what comprises justice. But justice becomes

absurd, he said, when neither side can compromise.

“Justice provides well-being. You cannot provide well-being for others if you have no compassion.”

“Rahma,” he continued, does not mean justice as a pre-condition. “It’s something you can choose. You can have resentment in your heart or you can choose rahma – even when it’s painful.”

In an interview that he’d given to a journalist, he said that he had been asked why he had nothing bad to say about Israel. “What’s the point?” he had replied. “I know Israel did bad things, but the Palestinians did bad things too. The question is how can we start a new path for peace?”

He insisted that there must be something that will change the situation and emphasized his belief that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the problem of just two parties, but one that impacts the whole region as well as Indonesia’s position in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Muslim League and Muslim countries.

The dynamics involved are political, economic and religious, he said, commenting that the latter is very problematic because in classical Islam there is enmity to and segregation from non-Muslims and there are still people with that particular mindset who are unwilling to acknowledge new realities.

People on both sides must change, he declared, and drew a parallel between the conflict and people suffering life-threatening illnesses. “Medication is not enough. You have to change your lifestyle.”

If the direction of the conflict doesn’t change, he warned, “then horrible consequences are waiting for us.”

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